



*Srivilliputtur :
Ruminations of a Rambler*

■ Tales & Essays



By S.Ramesh



Shakespeare's Desk



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My word....

If you have taken this book to be a work of fiction , you have erred.

It is a kind of historical document of a particular town , to be precise , my town Srivilliputtur.

The theological origin of a place of divine worship is called *Sthala puranam* (The story of a spot). This book is yet another *Sthala puranam* of my own town , that has a rich cultural and religious history. It certainly made me feel very proud, when I knew that the epoch of my town dates back to the Before Christ era.

The Western ghats that stand as background standing majestically running south-north , must have been one of the oldest mountains in the peninsula. A tectonic study of its rock surfaces goes on to prove that it is one among the oldest mountain ranges with its origin dating back to millions of years.

When I knew that Poetess Andal (the only female one among the twelve Vaishnavite

Azhwars) was born in the year 3004 B.C., in my home town, I was taken away by amazement. King Thirumalai Nayak of 16th century ruled the southern districts stretching from erstwhile Madurai down south up to Travancore regions, that were once a part of his vast Nayak Kingdom.

I write about my town, as I know about it.

It's my native place. The place I am quite familiar with since my birth.

It's paying a homage to the cradle, where I took safe shelter.

It should have extended into an epic, but this is the least I can do.

The genre of the content is a matter beyond consideration. It may be an essay or short story or any other form. The content conveyed matters much more than the craft.

Of late, I ventured on a new form called 'esstory' (a portmanteau word coined out of essay + story). *The Barefoot Doctor* was originally

intended to be an essay , but later, I essayed it
in the form of a short story. The matter matters,
rather than the manner, isn't it ?

**33 South Car Street ,
Srivilliputtur,
Date : 05-07-2014.**

Dedicated to the sweet features
of my town
that gravitates me to stay
in my hometown for long.

Dedicated to Shri T.A.S. Ramasamy ,
the first citizen of Srivilliputtur town.
To Sa. Devadas , renowned translator ,
my guru.

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1.The Science of Luck

Believe me , I can brand myself a very unlucky man. I make this statement in all its superlative tone. I dare make this. I had never been kissed by the Angel of Fortune. I make a casual regurgitating of the events that happened in my life.

Those were the days (1980's) when men of my state and stature believed that lottery tickets can bring a fortune to a person. I was tempted to try my hand in it. It was not just out of curiosity, that I ventured to buy some tickets. Hindus in India believe that Goddess Laxmi is the official deity of wealth and prosperity. I believed sincerely she would sympathise and take a lenient look on me. More emphatically, the lottery tickets issued had the shining image of Laxmi sitting cross-legged on that red lotus. I had austere religious beliefs that

she would favour the devotees of Vishnu. (She is the counterpart of Vishnu).

First, I tried with tickets that were priced eight annas

(half a rupee). An old man who hawked in the streets all the day, carrying a khaki cloth bag was my favourite vendor. He was a man in 60's, too aged to sell raffle tickets. He stared at the customers through his thick soda glasses and spoke through his stalactite teeth stained with betel leaves and tobacco. I had always seen him 'grinding ' that betel leaves and lime mixture in his mouth. His mouth was reddish and juicy. As he spoke, his native vernacular Tamil dialect got a new twist. He spoke mostly through his finger gestures and sold his lucky tickets.

This old gentleman sold me tickets every week. Each time he sold his wares , he never forgot to remind me of the dates of the

draw. This aroused my curiosity as I anxiously awaited the days looking at the calendar. As the lucky draw date drew nearer, the mercury level in my anxiety thermometer increased steadily.

I remember, I usually bought three or four tickets at a time. I preserved them so safely in the teak wooden box which my father owned as a prized possession. On the day of the draw, I walked up to the nearby coffee stall, and browsed the pages of the daily. I was nervous every moment till I arrived at the column printed with numbers of fortune. Undoubtedly it was disappointment each time as I gazed at the numbers declaring the results.

Later, the organisers abolished the half-a-rupee-lottery tickets, perhaps to discourage me from trying my hand at it. The Indian money nose-dived due to inflation. The price of tickets was fixed at a rupee. I did not lose hope. I ventured relentlessly. I bought one or two at a

time. Later, I dreamt of making huge money by bagging a jackpot. My father was equally interested in this. I had always seen his wallet filled with a few crisp, colourful tickets. But , Goddess Laxmi treated both my father and myself equivocally. She did not wink even once.

Inflation took another turn. This time , the price of tickets steeped to five and ten. The money bag swelled to five millions and a crore. With the increase in the sum , the size, colour and gloss of the tickets increased considerably. My father continued to buy one or two tickets at a time. He thought his spiritual , puritanical mindset would be rewarded with a heavy monetary booty at the end virtually.

Dear reader, I hope you are aware of the old adage,

‘ If wishes were horses , then.....’

Each time I checked the results in the newspaper, I was surprised to see that it was a

coolie or a rickshaw puller or a municipal scavenger who lifted the prize bag.

I began to philosophise over the science of luck. How is it that the Angel of Luck gives a warm cuddle only to those who did not indulge in such a sweet , megabuck dream ?

The age of raffle tickets has gone. Now, it is the turn of the corporates to lure the consumers with larger-than-you -can-think type of prizes. The *Crorepati* shows made every middle -class Indian dream about becoming a millionaire overnight. They are vendors of dreams that are shiny and velvety. Obviously, intended to be given away to a blessed customer. I know that it would be a carpenter , electrician , gardener , plumber or a welder who should make his fortune not me. .

These days, I continue to get those motley-coloured lucky coupons given away after

a purchase at the mall. I have not lost the entire stock of optimism. There are some remnants that still prompt me to preserve those coupons inside my wallet just adjacent to a small , colour illustration of Goddess Laxmi, the deity of luck , fortune and wealth.

2. What the Revelation told the King to Do



Every documented incident is history. Undocumented one becomes a legend. Srivilliputtur town, a tiny spot in South Indian map has a legend that runs something like this.

Several centuries ago, when there were no sundials or calendars, there were twin kings named Villi and Kanndan, who ruled Southern Tamil Nadu. One day, they ventured on a

hunting in deep jungle. While being exhausted owing to mid-day sun , they were separated in their ways. Kanndan, who was tracing the path to reach his brother, chanced to cross the dark interiors of the jungle and while doing so , a fierce tiger pounced upon him and mangled him.

Unaware of his brother's fate, Villi slept under a tree and in his dream it was revealed , that his beloved brother was killed by a wild beast. However, he was further instructed that if he proceeded further from the place where he was reposing, he would see dishevelled earth with termite structures.

By the dictation of the mystical inner voice, Villi proceeded in the direction as his feet dragged him. He might not have forwarded a furlong , when he saw the termite-ridden soil. He saw a white-necked *garuda* (Eagle) flying high above making circles over the termite structures.

Taking the avian guidance as an intervention of ethereal agency, Villi dug up the earth. Lo, behold ! it was the statuette of Lord Vishnu and his counterparts buried sub-terraneously.

A pious Villi turned spiritually scintillated, brought out all the icons to the surface. What he saw there were his own saviour Gods. And after much brooding and thought , he decided to build a temple for Lord Vishnu at the very spot where he unearthed his patron deities. His design and dictation resulted in the construction of a magnificent temple , a granite grandeur.

The Tamil word ‘ *puthu* ’ means termite-ridden earth. Since, Villi built it from ‘ *puthu* ’, the town was christened as ‘ Villiputhur’. *Sri* is the prefix that connotes Goddess Lakshmi, the one who holds the portfolio of wealth. Thus , the town got the name Srivilliputtur.

The Nayak kings who ruled the south, with Madurai as their capital, were ardent

worshippers of Vishnu. They elaborated the extent of the temple. Thirumalai Naicker, was a Vaishnavite by birth. He donated priceless ornaments and precious jewels of gems to the temple. Wet lands were given away to the temple staff as *Inam* lands (service lands) in lieu of salary and elaborate arrangements were made for pooja services six-times a day. Liberal provisions for *anna dhanam* (free food distribution) for visiting pilgrims were also made.

The Nayak king was too devout that he made an arrangement by which , each night when the final service for the Lord was over , a big gong was struck. There was another bell somewhere a mile away. The second one was sounded in relay succession upon hearing the sound from the first one.

In this fashion , there were bells erected in *mandapams*

(quadrangle halls) all over from Srivilliputtur to Madurai, which is 50 miles away. Upon hearing the sound from the bell near his palace, the Rajah went to the supper table.

Many a legend surrounds the Goddess Andal temple. Devotees throng the precincts each day in pure faith to earn Her benedictions. The Tamil Nadu government took the temple *gopuram* (tower) as its official logo, thus stamping it with executive recognition.

3. The Story of a Divine Poetess



Somewhere, in the year 3004 B.C. , it is believed, Goddess Lakshmi took an incarnation and was born in Srivilliputtur, much closer to the spot where the King Villi built a temple to exalt his Saviour. One morning, when Periazhwar, a devout servant whose official duty was to bring flowers to the Vishnu temple, was in his usual job in the floral garden. As he was picking up the flowers, he heard the cries of a young baby.

He discovered a just-born-baby amidst the *Tulsi* (*Ozimum Sanctum*) plants. Since Tulsi plants are held in due reverence in Vaishnava faith, Periazhwar esteemed the baby discovered under it as 'Direct-divine-descending '. He christened the child as Andal. As Andal grew up , she had excessive devotion for Lord Krishna. Her pious dotage was too strong that , she had no desire to marry a mortal , but only Krishna Himself. What is more, when her father

made garlands for Vishnu to be worn , Andal took them , wore them , checked herself in front of a mirror.

Periazhwar one day, caught her while wearing the garlands meant for the Lord. A furious Periazhwar scolded the innocent-daughter censuring her for the sacrilege. Later, when he went to the Lord's presence and garlanded them , all the garlands fell on the floor, a sign of rejection. What is more, Vishnu addressing Periazhwar maintained that He preferred the ones already worn by Andal and not the fresh ones.

Andal , the only poetess among the twelve Azhwars, sang thirty Thiruppavai , hymns which are deemed to the very epitome of Tamil devotional literature. Her father Periazhwar is one among the twelve Azhwars.



4. The Deserted Village or the Forsaken Deity

The Tamil name '*Acham thavirthaan*' literally means

'one who warded off fear'. The reason why that tiny village got that peculiar name is unknown. Probably, a title attributed to the presiding deity of the temple in the western end of the village.

Situated 7 miles away to the east of Srivilliputtur town , the chief landmark of Achamthavirthaan is the Vishnu temple. Aged a few centuries , its walls cordon off on all four sides. Built with tough granite blocks , the vertical thick patches of alternate marks of white and brick red *namam* on its external walls betray the presence of a vaishnava temple for any visitor. Its aged, tarnished, wooden gates that are 20 feet tall , remain unguarded unless a heavy iron lock protects the safety of the shrine. The inner cubicle has vast square corridors all around it , for devotees to go around. A decades-old , peepul tree that withers dry leaves in autumn, stands in the sandy corridor. The pale leaves rustle under one's feet as he steps around with subservient devotion.

The *sanctum sanctorum* is cavern-dark and horrifies the entrant. The deity inside is one Srinivasa Perumal , who stands with two female

consorts, Lakshmi and Bhoodevi on either sides. The Lord is in anxious anticipation for worshippers to come. None but the crows , pigeons , fruit-gobbling bats and insects visit to pay respects to Him.

The lone priest one Mr. Santhanam , a man in his fifties , a career-less man is the only human comfort for the *paramathma* inside. The man arrives in a bicycle at 4-00 pm in the light-slanting evening. He opens the doors, enters into the pantry in a corner of the temple, cooks a few morsels of food, takes it in a bronze concave cup, places in front of Swamy , sprinkles some water on it , rings a bell , breaks a coconut , circles a camphor flame around the staring deity and closes the food cup with an oil-stained white cloth. He packs up the cooked food in a vessel. He locks the temple , mounts on his bicycle and is gone. The deity who gets just a

single visitor a day, is now left all alone to fix His eyes in hellish darkness.

Back in *agraharam* (Brahmin-ghetto), the only inhabiting family is that of a female cook, whose son is the priest cited *supra*. Anguchi Ammal , the cook married off her two daughters and wants to dispose her house to any prospective buyer in the village. Once, she vends it , she might depart with her son Santhanam for Bangalore , to join her band of relatives.

Years back , one after another , the families in the ghetto began to alienate their ancestral houses for any reasonable consideration and departed. When their offsprings were well-learnt , they had no second thought in fleeing the village. Most of them are now in distant metro- cities , some of them in Toronto, Vancouver, Nottinghamshire or Seattle.

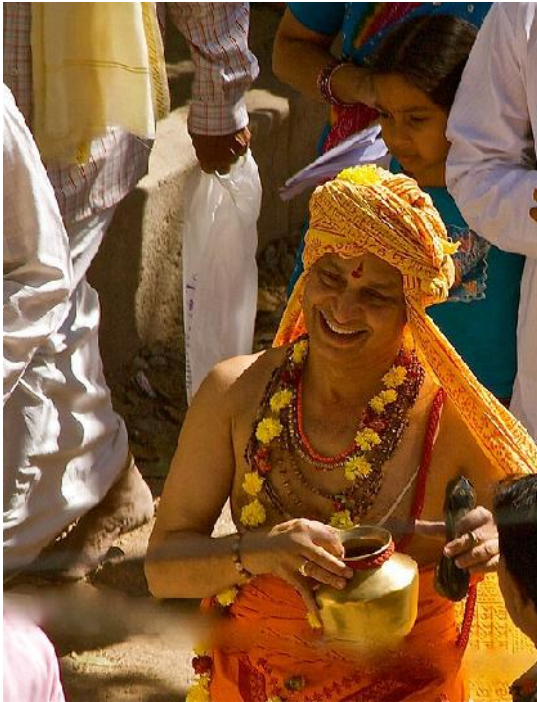
There are two rows of tiled houses on either side leading to the façade of the temple.

With Anguchi , too torn and decrepit , the chances of Lord Vishnu to have the service support of the only family appear too flimsy. Achamthavirthaan , today, resembles a medieval historical monument in ruins and desolation.

Scores of villages that are around Srivilliputtur have lost the ghetto residents , who rendered invaluable pooja services and promulgated a rich heritage , that blessed their families complementarily. A frail, Anguchi Ammal is too uneager to send her son to priestly services, which is wholly un-remunerative and seldom career-sustaining.

The epoch of village temples in rural pockets is a dying legacy, just too inadequately portrayed in words. The cruel sweep of monstrous hands of time and rapid urbanisation takes severe toll in several spheres, the Achamthavirthaan relic , not the least.

5. The Sing-song cult of Srivaishnava School



The only handicap with Indian history of the past is the lack of complete and systematic documentation. The glory of the past has been unearthed by archaeologists and the curious

only to find pieces of information. Later, while putting together the available fragments and building them to a decipherable shape, what it looks like is an unsolved jigsaw puzzle. All broken pieces. No finite form.

Historians are often in the dark about lack of chronicles of many an event in the national annals. Or even if they fix a date, it is mere speculation.

For instance, the Mohenjo-Daro and Harappan civilizations that existed in the 2600 BC, have no chronicle-form substantiation in writing. The Harappan alphabet and script are beyond human comprehension. Sir John Marshall was the pioneer in the excavations of these two historical sites, yet a complete picture is rather unavailable till this day.

In this age of internet and space exploration, there are some cults and societies that are not well-documented and brought to

the light of the world. Unnoticed , they provoke the curious onlookers , one like me.

The period of origin of *Bhagavatha* cult is unknown. It is too difficult to specify. It certainly lacks textual proof much the same as Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa , the sites of civilization , leaving everyone to surmise.

My father was a guide of *Bhagavatha Bhakti* cult. My forefathers were their gurus . It is difficult to define

‘ *Bhagavatha Cult* ’. A typical , off-beat bhakti religious sect.

Having no banner or poly-vinyl billboard , they can be spotted in annual temple festivals and Vaishnava congregations. Gathering in huge numbers like honeybees , they stand apart. The dates of the temple *utsavam* might not be advertised in media. There may not be advertisement hype. Yet , by word of mouth , the

festival fixtures and details spread fast as wild fire. These *bhagavatha* enthusiasts converge there.

Unlike the caravan groups or pilgrims of other faiths , these *bhagavathas* disdain to carry expensive baggage items. All that they carry is a big canvas bag. They prefer not to sleep on carpets and pillows. They spread well an ochre cloth or a dhoti on the floor and snore.

The cult members carry no credit cards or expensive items during their travel. Nor have I spotted them wearing shirts. They remain bare - chested. A saffron dhoti is their trade mark identity. Their foreheads and torso bear the mark of *namam* (three vertical lines).

The vaishnava convention goes at a stretch for 10 days. ‘ The gong foretells the arrival of the elephant ’ goes a Tamil adage. You see swarming , Bhagavatha peer group members loitering in the streets. This means the

July Vaishnava convention is approaching in the vicinity.

The local inns and choultries, community halls, mutts and *mandapams* are swept clean and washed neat to await these guests who converge from everywhere.

Getting food is no big worry for *Bhagavathas*. The choultries and inns turn *ad hoc* pantry halls. Women turn cooks. Provisions are purchased in massive quantities. A two-hundred or three-hundred member strong team works together in unison. Men do other chores. Few more join this 'religious battalion'. Here they go.

The convention is marked by pious worship , scripture recitation , prolonged sermons and explications. The mutts and inns turn out to be lecture halls too. Hundreds sit cross-legged on the floor to recite the quartets of *Nalayira Divya prabandham* (The Book of Four thousand

hymns) in ideal tempo and harmony. Ahem ! it's a melody one can't afford to miss.

The preachers and text-interpreters are not university wits. Yet, they have mastered the scriptures in a unique way. Repetition is the way to memorise the texts. ' *The Book of Four Thousand Hymns* ' is their gospel. They recite it line by line, quartet by quartet , all in solemn devotion.

I have been avidly studying this Bhakti faction since my youth. The unlettered cult is the object of my curiosity.

Cleanliness is their visible trait. Ablutions are regular and done religiously. Unclean members are discouraged from attending the discourses. Narcotics are unseen and unheard of in their circles. Piety is the buzz word.

Worship , discourse , worship. This is the sandwich lifestyle they are used to. Lunch

menu is excessively heavy, which is invariably followed by sound siesta in the hot afternoons. The mandapams are breakfast halls in the morning, lecture rooms in the forenoon, lunch floors in the mid-day and slumber chambers in the afternoon.

The pre-dawns and nights still reverberate with the sound of *bhajan* (carol) sung in praise of Lord Krishna. A clean blend of cymbals and percussion drums, supported by the harmonium notes. Every *bhagavatha* is a good singer by his very own nature, inherited. The skill is perfected through practice. They move in groups, sing, dance in circles, and hail Krishna in their melodies. The jingling cymbals and metallic discs still echo in my ears as I walk down the streets around the temple.

In the unenergetic evenings they squat and chat casually, preferably in coarse Telugu. (Most of them are Telugu-speaks). The topic

usually centres around the next venue of convention . One *Bhagavatha* who might be the memory box , hints at the commencement of a carnival next month far off in the state. This ignites the spark. Another Bhagavatha suggests the route map. A third one prescribes the means of transport. Logistics taken by another. A voice in the crowd promises dwelling place for the party. This sets them off . Oral plans are chalked out . No paper works.

The celestial wisdom is their leading light. The divine dedication is the spur of inspiration. The word of guru is the verdict. The unearthly is the target of the earthly.

The end of the temple fiesta sets off the next one for these itineraries. Most of them are *ryots* or those who renounced their families. The *Bhagavatha* strike a perfect balance between material gratification and providential pursuit.

It is yet another historical legacy of this nation, undocumented, unrecorded and historically chronicled , one like the Mohenjo-Daro and Harappan civilizations.

The UNESCO declare some monumental sites and sponsor funds to preserve them as ‘ heritage sites ’ all over the world. The *Bhagavatha* cult established probably during the days of Ramanuja , the founder of Sri Vaishnava school deserves no less to be preserved as a ‘ living , practising faith cult to be preserved.’

6. Many Malgudis that dot the country map



The other day, I was taken by surprise to spot an old man, a puritanical priest in the Lord Shiva temple in my town who sported the looks and descriptions of a typical R. K. Narayan's character. You might not have failed to esteem and cherish the line drawings of the much-adored R.K. Laxman , bringing to life, the people as verbally portrayed by his brother. The priest was pitch tar in colour and donned a black rimmed glasses. The man in his mid-sixties

had smeared holy ash over his forehead and forearms that shone resplendently. As he gazed at me distributing the *prasad*, the camphor flare rose high making his eye balls glow. We mutually stared fixed at each other's faces. For a moment , I had a frenzy, if the man straightaway stepped out of the cartoonist's sketch board alive in all flesh and blood.

Brooding over the incident later, I realized the universality of the late writer's fictitious town Malgudi , if not the universality, the way it fits itself into the geography of any mediocre south Indian town. The ingenuity of the maverick writer was at once striking and drew me admiringly to him more than ever before.

The hub of the Malgudi's activities is market square , which is there in my town , where a clock tower stands majestically. The Albert Mission High School is not there and

Sacred Heart Convent stands in its place instead. This Roman Catholic mission-run institution is almost a century old. My town boasts proudly of Pennington market built during the days of the Raj, by a Lord Pennington who was also the collector of the erstwhile 'Tinnevely' District. As people budge in and out of the market, the deafening din caused is almost akin to what Narayan depicts in his stories. No difference.

The Albert Mission college stands outside my town about 6 miles away ; just the signboard is different.

Every evening as I stroll to the railway station , it is Malgudi station that is a prominent landmark in the writer's fiction works. I don't see any *Talkative Man* like Mr. Rann moving in there to occupy the visitor's room for a certain number of weeks , as it remains always locked.

Kabir street is the avenue of the peace-loving landlords where people dozed off too slackened in the afternoons in the *pyols*. The Kandhadai street where I am aboded is none the way less than Kabir street. The Ellamman street that marks the peripheral end of heart of Malgudi has been christened with a different name. At the end of Ellamman street, Nallappa's grove is not there, but sylvan settings begin. Small hamlets dot around my town as in Malgudi.

The archetypal Railway station is but the one in the east of my town, about 3 miles away, that reminds me of the one in Malgudi. The visitor's room in the station is well-furnished, but, remains under lock and key for fear that there might me a visitor to usurp it as Mr. Rann does in *The Talkative Man*.

The Mempi hills which serve as a nature's picturesque backdrop where the hero Railway Raju and his paramour Rosie have a nightmarish tryst is there (as in *The Guide*) but its name is western ghats. The Sarayu river that supplies a perennial furnish of salubrious water for Malgudi flows , bearing the name Kaattazhagar river, but its force and gush vanishes as it reaches the mountain foot.

One hears the Taluk office gong tolling the night hours in Narayan's stories. The practice existed both in Malgudi and my town, but ages ago. Modernization sounded the knell of every time-cherished practice. Each time I moped my way to a nearby village, something tells me it is but another one culled out of Malgudi map , say Koppal. Near the town bus stand, I see a hire-cab driver who is but Gaffur look-alike. (Gaffur tones up all rickety vehicles and drives them in and around the town).The

Lawley Extension named after the great philanthropist Sir Frederick Lawley is the N.G.O. Colony extension on the eastern side. There are no Margayyas sitting outside the co-operative banks waiting to help the village rustics to fill in the loan application forms (as in *The Financial Expert*). But, a handful of scriveners ply their trade, drafting petitions and requisitions addressed to the local tahsildar.

My fictional obsession (fiction-based one) has lasted for two decades and dissuades me to migrate to any metro city leaving my own ever-memorable native ‘ Malgudi ’ town Srivilliputtur in Virudhunagar district.

(*The New Indian Express* , Mindspace ,
dated 17-03-2012)

7. *The Little World of Gurunathan Cafeteria*



Dear reader,

As you stand at the portal of Sri Andal temple in Srivilliputtur, and be patient enough to spare a look , mark these things. To your left , you spot usual hackneyed hawkers, flower-sellers, fakirs, *Swamijis*, the reputed milk-khova shop, yet, wish them gently away.

Beyond these, if you step on the granite pedestals, ascend and step not far, on your left you catch the bright presence of a

cafeteria. I name this ' boardless hotel ' as no visible signboards declare its conspicuous presence.

Looking beyond the jostling crowd, sauntering in and out, in the front , do you visualize a raised cement platform , beyond which Mr. Gurunathan , appareled in virgin-white vest , and just a red turkey towel around his loins is busy, brewing coffee in a kerosene stove ? He occasionally steals a corner just to inhale a pinch of snuff through the ' odoriferous concavities to quicken his slackened brain '. The blokes inside seated on stools who are breakfasting , are swiftly attended by a team of three waiters who continue to be energetic , for being afraid of scolded by their master. In the front row of metal chairs, you see *namam*-wearing temple priests guzzling down , aromatic , piping coffee in cup and saucer before resuming

their service at the *sanctum sanctorum* for the *suprabadham* service .

In the vertical glass four-tier rack, what do you see, but jasmine-soft idlis , kesari , puris , crisp vada and the rest you must be familiar with. Poorly- lit interiors serve culinary delicacies, all mouth-watering , served under the gracious eyes of Rama and Sita hung from the wall.

I bet in all the corners of this planet , you don't have paid a pittance sum for generous food as our Gurunathan's , who would feed you for a measly Rs. 30, when monetary inflation skyrockets to the next galaxy.

Celebrating the 43rd year since its installation, the little eatery spaced in a narrow 8 feet x 12 feet room , must be the proverbial golden-egg laying goose for its sole proprietor. Being a Telugu-speak, he learnt the gastronomic

task of titillating the taste buds at a green age and despised his schooling.

A limited quantity of stuff, with low profit-margin worked out the smart business equation , and Gurunathan is not an Harvard MBA. But being money-wise, rupee-wise in layman's economics, invested all the hordes of cash he made regularly in acquiring agricultural farms, antique houses, automobile and what not.

His incomes multiplied in geometrical proportions and in his forties , he fathered three buxom lasses, all whom he wedded away to prospective technocrats and high-end bridegrooms.

At 60 , when *Shashtiyabdha poorthi* (60th year marriage ceremony) was scheduled to be prepared , Gurunathan being too whacky , expressed his desire that he would not sit for the function with his aged wife, but with a new, clean , virgin girl.

His servants being well-paid , his wares being sold too quick everyday, his family being domestically well-set , his bank balance so comfortable , being grandfathered through his daughters , Gurunathan is at his ease in hotel and home.

Last week, he shocked me stating he would shut down his business once for all , calling it a day. Nothing more would shock me, as he is my masculine Annapoorna Devi , feeding me twice at affordable throw-away prices. Irate gods are pacified by sacrificial poojas. Irate persons through prudence. I sacrificed my wit and dignity at the altar of my ' breakfast-benefactor '. I eulogized my favourite chef in a befitting English sonnet. Neatly rhymed , the four lines in it, when interpreted in vernacular, should have raised his eyebrows.

You that seateth café by Andal temple beside

Bestride upon stool behind kerosene stove
Busy with thy wares, quick in spirit
One that dons a banian snow - white
Schooling thou hast none, lettered scarce
Yet schooled in catering makes one amaze
As dosas hot on plate spread as lotus pad
Dawn lights the day, the town unfold
What art, subtle blessed skill thou possess
To churn out those gentle idlis
White as lily, soft jasmine, no crusts
Better than my better half's ----- ?
Piping coffee, crisp vada, sambar of onion
Tingling in taste, neat recipe fine.

My aged friend guffawed at these lines (the missing word in rhyme sequence left to your guess). He peered at me, anticipating my demand for a favour in return. Needless to state, I pleaded with my gourmet-cook, to continue render his stomach-appeasing service.

Dear reader, my hard effort is done with altruistic ends. Put it this way, the regular pilgrimage lot that frequent my town shall not be deprived of *Nala bhagam* Gurunathan's exquisite recipes.

8.The grocers of my town

The grocers of my town are always an interesting subject of study. I watch them curiously. The *vysya* community were the first to start groceries in my town and in south India. I think they start their business with a rupee. Later, they flourish in thousands. Constancy is their business. I have seen all little narrow spaces and crevices in my town

converted into petty retail outlets. This happened in 1950's or so.

What is interesting is the external appearances of the merchants. These merchants wear just a dhoti. They love to remain *shirtless*. They would start their business in the dawn and end by late night.

. The housewives are so fond of these shops. The reason is obvious. You can buy anything on retail basis. That too for fractions of measurements. Rice for two rupees, chillies for one rupee , tamarind for half a rupee, and salt for four annas. Women who become friendly with shopkeepers can get the above on credit too. You get vegetables, oil, kerosene, dhal, masala powders, detergent soaps (the brand names not heard anywhere) , liquid blue, sugar, sweets, razor blades, cigarettes , cigars, betel leaves , pawn nuts, cashew, cardamom, raisins, medicinal herbs, balms, *Anacin* and *Aspro* headache pills, semolina, talcum

powder, hair shampoos and almost everything except mom and dad. I guess you can get a cup of tiger's milk or a leopard's tail for a price.

The shopkeeper who belongs to *vysya* tribe is always ready to lend these commodities for a fraction of a rupee. His cash box (usually a solid, square teak box) jingles with coins all the time from dawn to night. They begin their day with a cup of coffee from brahmin cafeteria. Their afternoons are lazy. They listen to Tamil movie songs broadcast from Ceylon over a small transistor radio. They yawn and fan their bare chest with a palm-leaf.

These shopkeepers are my pals and sweet chaps.

I learn the world through their mouths. They know the secrets of big governments than those who rule them. We call them affectionately as

Chettiars. The name has nothing to do with 'cheating'.

9. On Christians I met with

My book of prose would be nearly incomplete , if I fail to mention about the Christians I met with in my life.

I speak what I know of. I write about whom I encountered with.

I still remember the years when I was in Kindergarten school. The institution proudly boasted of convent education. It had the elements of convent education in truth. Some of the teachers were Anglo-Indians. One of the nannies was a Roman Catholic. The Principal of the institution was a retired military man. My accursed memory does not assist me in furnishing extensive details. I recollect from my misty memories.

The Principal of the institution was a Protestant Christian. He lost his right hand in a battlefield. Not the entire hand, just all the fingers. He wore a leather glove over the right hand. He slapped the mischievous students with his glove-hand.

There were some married couples working as teachers in that institution. Ethnically, they were Anglo- Indians. Those were the glorious 1970's , when I saw a fairly large number of that race everywhere in every city I went. They were all sweet -natured Christians. They belonged to a minority group. I don't spot even one of them these days. The race has vanished in the crashing course of time.

Hence, the ABC's of education was imparted by Christians. Later, we moved off to another town for primary education. My mother took me to a school, that had its premises within a CSI - Church. I got admission at the

very first attempt, despite my orthodox Hindu background. This Church-affiliated institution did not last long.

My father came to this school inside the church campus one morning. He saw a wooden carriage neatly painted and its bronze coverings polished to a brittle. It was parked right at the backyard of the church, close to the classroom where I studied. A curious papa enquired its purpose. The class teacher stated that it was meant for carrying the coffin for the last journey of man. That's it. My father nodded his head. The very next day, he pulled me out of the church campus and re-admitted me in another secular institution.

Undaunted, my mother admitted me in a school, that was run by the charity of business men. All faces were new to me, and all students strangers. I knew nothing about my teachers. But, they were certainly of a loveable lot.

I nostalgically recollect those years when as a school-going child everything seemed be heaven-like. The Headmaster at that time (if my memory may permit me to recollect) was one Mr. Thomas Henry. He had a pitch-dark complexion , almost bald. He had eight gray hairs left on his ‘ desert- head’. He preferred white dhoti and white shirt , for it stood for sanctity. He was waiting for his superannuation. Age and experience tempered his work. A regular church-goer. On the first Sunday of every month, with all fear and fervour for ‘zblood’ he dropped tithes into the red velvet sagging bag with sincere spirituality.

The maxims of old testament guided his life and work. He trusted in the ecclesiastical words of King Solomon, ‘ Spare the rod, spoil the child’ . I had seen him caning the children standing in the long verandah of the school

campus. He had abundant religious sagacity, but paltry mathematical skills.

On the first of every month, his job profile included paying the salaries of the teaching staff. Our Thomas Henry trusted not his numerical precision, but the smartness of his subordinates. He gave away the counting task to the teachers on the next rung of the school ladder. Thus, I had seen laborious and cautious hands counting cash in 10's and 20's on the last working day of every month. I don't remember I had frequent encounters with Thomas Henry.

From grade VI upwards, they had a separate English medium school there in another campus. I was transferred (or rather promoted) to another one much to my surprise. The class teacher was one short-statured man (if I fail to recall his name), it was one Mr. F. D. Rathnam. He was an austere Protestant Christian. His devotion in studies and tuition was so dutiful.

He had in him a missionary zeal to impart knowledge to all of us. His proficiency spanned over English, science, and maths.

If my remembrance power aids me, it was he who first taught me the 'glorious principle of Third Person Singular' rule in grammar. He preferred not to drop his red ink fountain pen down on the table and loved to check our notebooks so methodically with true scholarly devotion. The red stain on his right thumb almost stood as a permanent mark. It was the true reward he got for his pedagogy work.

F. D. Rathnam had such humour in him, that children loved to throng his table at the end of the class. It was he who conducted science exhibition in the class and awarded a small gift each to the student-exhibitors.

F. D. Rathnam was so neat and portly in appearance. He wore his short trousers folded

twice at the foot. He was neat in manners and clothing. His comportment was elegant. I could still feel the pain in my earlobes now, when I remember the way he twisted my ears upon erratic math answers.

My woes with protestants did not cease. They continued in Grade VIII too. For, I had been tutored by one quaint Mr. Noah Selvaraj. This gentleman was in late forties, when I entered into his class. He had a dark complexion like most southerners of my state. He had a stout physique and stood like Saul of Old Testament. His forehead had romantic baldness. He combed his hair backwards and posed with grace and majesty of Roman emperors. He loved to carry a rectangular leather bag that hung from his right arm. One could hardly see him parted with that leather bag. I had curious notion that he carried his '*Jeevathma*' in it.

This Noah Selvaraj learnt *The Book* so religiously and never skipped a Sunday Service during his lifetime. Strangely, he practised another religious faith too. He was a noted ball badminton champion. His evenings were energetically spent in the company of his teammates. He captained his team of seven and lifted the championship trophy in the district badminton tournaments for fifteen years in succession. The silver trophy that was shelved in the glass display case in the Headmaster's room lost its colour and got tarnished.

Noah Selvaraj taught History, geography and English. The methodology of his teaching seemed odd. He knew nothing about the topography of any nation (including his motherland). He knew about the topography of badminton court more than anything else. I saw him creeping towards the classroom (with muscle cramps) for evening private tutoring

classes after a long session in the windy, red court.

Noah struck terror in the minds of the school boys. He paid a certain sum out of his salary each month not as tithes to the CSI - Christian Diocese , but to buy special cane sticks from the bazaar. He amused himself with caning the students every now and then. It pleased him to see boys pleading not to cane. His favourite spot was the calf muscles below the knees. His strokes were swift and with a jerk. The pain inflicted by his ' wicked cane ' would last for two days.

Noah Selvaraj stood for Christian austerity. He remained virtuous instructed by the epithets of Old Testament. He got superannuated at 60. The post-service emoluments fixed him to his home to indulge in light recreation. He got his son married off to an orthodox Hindu

family, thus establishing his principle of 'religious secularism'.

The next person of our literary scrutiny is Mr. Deva Kalanjiam. He hailed from the Southern district of Cape Comorin. His tummy foretold his arrival. His garments presented him as an earnest person. His white terry-cotton shirt spoke of his cleanliness. His shortcomings were eclipsed by the language he spoke. He knew grammar rules better than those legendary Wren and Martin. He loved *The Book* and English alike.

This Mr. Deva Kalanjiam taught poetry. He explicated words in depth with allusions and short anecdotes. In classroom, he was an unchallenged panther. His wit was sharpened with his imagination. He had a strong passion for language. I am sure, the earlier seeds of learning English were sown by him. I

owe my debt to him. These words are but homage to that fine gentleman.

Deva Kalanjiam had a deep fascination for educative entertainment. Hence, we had frequent film-shows in the campus. The white-washed space at the rear wall of the school building was the silver screen for movies. They were usually documentaries. It was real fun those days.

Nay, he loved extensive travelling. Travelling beyond the borders too. Thus, he organised a student tour to Ceylon, toured the Buddhist monasteries with his taught and opened up new frontiers in tour-education.

Mr. Devakalanjiam left the most prestigious school that tutored eighteen hundred students from grade 6 onwards. I learnt that , later he joined the Evangelical service in the southern districts of Tamil Nadu.

The immediate successor to the throne as school Headmaster was Mr. D. J. Paul Raj. Yet another Protestant Christian. He assumed his 'throne' and had boundless ardour for teaching English.

Mr. Paul Raj lacked authority. He was short-sighted and wore big correction glasses. He preferred creamy white dress on all occasions. He loved to teach English literature. He skipped lunch on most of the days and survived on coffee and biscuits. His religious holiness stood beyond normal limits. 'His Lord was his shepherd'.

DJP longed to make his students gain laurels in the Public exams. His words were unique. His lectures were always tinged with social satire and political criticism. He loved phonetics and poetry. Yet, as an administrator he was Don Quixotic. He lacked the voice of

authority and failed often to grip the institution by the power of his sceptre.

The school that stood as the synonym of 'academic reputation' later went into the tunnel of decadence. Things were no longer the same that was in the glorious past. The successors of Mr. Paul Raj were also frail and brittle.

I had no occasion to be in the company of Christians of sound profile, later in my lifetime. They were just nominal Christians and not worth mentioning here.

Forgive me for testing your patience, dear reader, these men whom I mentioned above were those who mended my career and life. I am what as they have made me. And for my present status, I owe a lot to them. This is my verbal homage to them. Amen !

CSI - Church of South India

10. The Ritual of Initiation to Letters

In the days of the immemorial past , there was a ritual practice of initiating a young boy or girl to formal learning. This orientation ceremony was called in Sanskrit as

‘Akshara abyaasam’ (*Initiation to letters*). Admittedly, this must have been a practice that was a remnant of the age of *gurukula* scheme of education.

In *gurukula* system , the principal focus of education centred around the guru , who decided the destiny of the student. The parent brought his child to the presence of the guru, who was a quasi-parent and pleaded with the latter to impart education which might be lessons in Vedas , math , languages , poetry, archery or any other art that might have been prominent during the contemporary period then. The *Kshatriya* sect was taught warfare. The

cardinal point of education was built on the edifice of core ethics.

The *Akshara abyaasam* retained the traces of the time-cherished *guru-shishya* relationship (Teacher-Taught) pattern. On an auspicious day, already fixed by the *purohit* (priest), the parent fetched the child , who was just 3 or 4, to the school. The teachers were well-informed in prior. The priest spread paddy on the floor and made a rectangular design of 1 x 2 feet dimension. Then , he made one more rectangle of the same size with sand. Both of them were decorated with flowers. Then he placed a plate with bananas, coconut, a garland , fresh blossoms , sandalwood paste, vermilion powder and the rest befitting a Hindu rite.

The young , milkish-innocent boy who wore new outfits for the occasion, was garlanded and his forehead drawn with a *naamam* (three vertical lines, with two white

lines on either side and a red one in the middle). Then the boy was seated on the lap of his father, while the *purohit* took the boy's right index finger and wrote the Tamil alphabet 'aa' on the paddy. He ran the finger gently along the paddy, with all its nuances as he sing-sang the vowel sound in a declaratory tone. This was repeated several times till the boy felt something was done to him as a kind of 'pedagogical torture'. Eventually, he was baffled by the crowd that surrounded him.

Then the priest repeated the exercise, this time on sand with a Sanskrit alphabet , which had more gentle curves than the vernacular one. The onlookers, usually the nears and dears would make a blessing remark including augury over the future career of the boy. These predictions either by chance or by accident turned out to be true. It was a custom

that the maternal uncle should gift cash or kind to the new student on the occasion.

While, the ritual is scholarly, the person who might have never understood what was going around him was none other than the little boy. Looking at the odd crowd of teachers and fellow-students who almost jostled with each other, each one dictated a new order of the ceremony, as the priest denying and stating something in counter that ran dire opposite to it, with references from scriptures and precedents,

The scenario was no less than a fun-filled scholastic jamboree. Then the boy had to prostrate at the feet of the guru, his father and the priest, get the blessings of everyone, and a new person had been inducted into the formal education. As turmeric-tinged rice was strewn on his head, it was a moving moment of solemn occasion.

The would-be teacher of the school was also a partaker in the ceremony. And he would be the one to be honoured with coconuts , plantains , betel leaves , sandal paste and a token-monetary sum.

The priest would also give the same set of sacred offerings to the rest of the crowd. The *purohit* gets his payment and is off from school premises only to join them back for lunch at the child's home by mid-day.

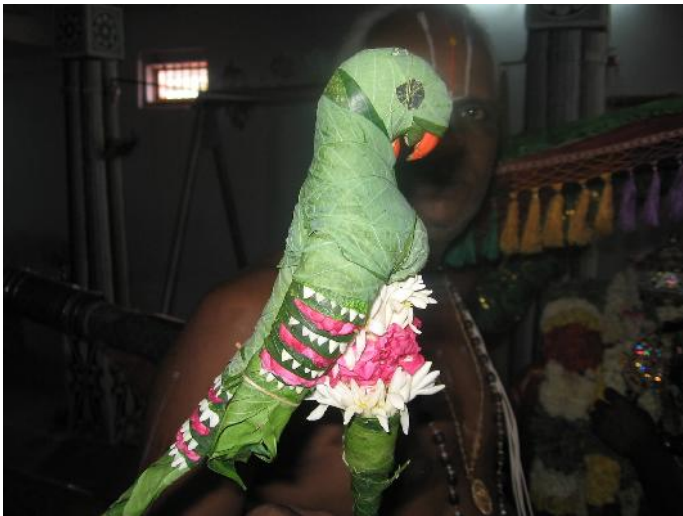
It was Pitchu Vaathiyar (*Vaathiyar* is the other name for *purohit*) who was the official-standing *purohit* who held the credit for performing this ritual for many a child in my maternal uncle's family. He was never greedy and very assiduous and pious in performing the rite as per customs and traditional wonts. Just a word informed in prior on the eve of the function , he turned up in full cleric 's shape with *naamam* and *pancha katcham* (a style of

wearing dhoti) wound over his fat, bulky physique. He was the purohit for all occasions , weal or woe for our family. That he was too attached and became almost a member in the home was too touching to cherish. He was ninety five when he passed off. With him departed the aura of a past-Hindu practice in our family.

A few years back , I went to admit my son in the kindergarten school for pre-primary studies. The She-Principal conducted an interview for my child, who was 3. After the rigmaroles of admission procedures, the accountant quoted the net sum of book fees, tuition fees, uniform charges and a list of 'fees' of every name and description at Rs. 18,000/- It was my wife who held me firmly, as I almost began to swoon on the chair. I didn't refer to the practice of *Akshara abyasam* to seek their leave, if such a ceremony could be permitted to

be held there at the premises. For the *Guru-Shishya* saga is something of the bygone era , long back extinct , so are the core values of ethics-based education.

11. *The Extinct Saga of Charming Aves*



The days of the past always appear too glossy and too colourful while juxtaposed with the present. Memories of yesteryears, when

regurgitated, taste sweeter, as we recall the rosy days of the innocent youth.

In the days of yore , I remember, as a little boy, when my weekends were spent in the company of my granny in Srivilliputtur. Noted for its remote location, it proudly boasted of endless , emerald- paddy fields surrounding a town whose epicentre is a renowned Andal temple built ten centuries ago. Built of solid granite stones, without the material use of cement or steel rods , the holy shrine was the cynosure of attraction for tourists who thronged the spot during *utsavam* (festival) days.

While the presiding deity is Sri Andal (whose *Thiruppavai* poetry is hailed as the essence of the vedas) the key attractions of the *sanctum sanctorum* were its austere appearance , architectural grandeur and solemn silence.

When summer temperature outside read 102 degrees on the Fahrenheit thermometer scale ,

the inner corridors that were well ventilated by an ingenious architect of erstwhile era, whose design and craft ensured a perennial supply of fresh, cool air just enough to make any devotee feel drowsy.

Of the chief attractive features that took the note of curious visitors , a fresh hand-woven parrot made of leaves , flowers, thin sticks and buds that adorned the left shoulder of Goddess Andal was the prime one. Andal sans parrot would be like Sri Rama without his mighty bow. In her rhythmic poesy, Andal makes the parrot as a messenger of her love while her divine infatuation is expressed towards Sri Krishna. '

Thoothu sellayo en kolak kizhiyae'

(Won't you go as my messenger , my pretty
parrot ? ')

The woven bird was made by the providence-blessed , deft hands of a menial servant , one Mr. Raman, who was just given a

handful of rice ball *prasadam* at noon in return for his subtle craft by the temple authorities. The humble man who rendered the ' bird-making ' service all his life, sought nothing in return from the *devasthanam* authorities.

Apart from the green-leaf parrot that rested on the shoulder of Sri Andal everyday, as if being its live counterpart, there were umpteen number of parrots that flew in and around the partially-lit , chill corridors all the day. What is more , a vast number of them departed in the early dawn for the day's food-gathering work. The sweet chirping of the birds was the wake-up call for the priests who had to render the *suprabatham* (morning temple service). The frozen silence of the air is punctuated with the sounds of these dozens of parrots, lending a typical charm to the milieu. The summary feeling of supra-consciousness is felt during those moments.

A few months back, when Mr. Raman went to gather his usual flora and foliage for the day, the bicycle in which he rode was hit by a rash-running autorickshaw. He was admitted in the local dispensary and took treatment for severe , multiple injuries for a few weeks, before he breathed his last. His two sons who learnt the art of ' parrot-making', during the lifetime of his father, could not apply the same vigour of art and craft with which Mr. Raman blew life into the bird. His successors failed to lead the continuity of this unique work. The deep tragedy is that these noteworthy, crafting skills are usually bequeathed to the succeeding progeny as a treasure and almost preserved as a family secret. Tragically, in this creative case, it failed with a fiasco.

These days as I offer my obeisance to Sri Andal, seldom do I fail to take a note of the adornment on her left shoulder. Upon studying

the ave , instinct dictates something inside me, that the ' man-made parrot ' of present times, is far less in grace than the ones made by Mr. Raman.

While going round the corridors , as live-parrots criss-cross me high above, a mystical sensation fills me, conveying a message that the ones flying must be the creations that emerged out of his hands in the past.

12. The Saga of a Lonely Railway Station



My obsession with my town is far excessive that I can't venture to write anything

save about it. Far away from the hue and cry of hectic life in megalopolis , my own little town Srivilliputtur is a tiny speck on the Indian topography.

As the Hindi-wallah visitors from the north arrive on a pilgrimage tour (like Chaucer's palmers in Canterbury Tales) they alight at the eerie, silent railway station where a person hears the stamping of his footsteps echoed in his ears.

During the days of the Raj , the Sahib engineers arrived in my town, with land survey maps , theodolites , engineering tools and khaki bags much to the awe-struck natives. They were there to lay the new rail lines to link it with the rest of the nation.

One day, as they were pick-axing and toiling under a white-hot summer sun, there came a cowherd with a plaint. The rustic Yadav man pleaded with folded hands in supplication to English babus not to fix the lines through the

town , as the hooting of the steam engine would shock their livestock and that cows wouldn't yield forth milk through their udders. The British were kind enough to cows rather to men , hence told their henchmen to lay the tracks a full 5 kms off the town limits.

Hence , began the painful ordeal for the folks of our town. A self-seeking villager brought discomfort for the entire locality. A traveller destined for distant journey ought to hire a jutka, haggle with its driver to reach the station. When the bed and baggage were heavier , then the horse-driver raised his fare. Far detached from the heart of town , the spot is unmanned, unvisited almost all the day, barring its dutiful staff.

Just a train from Chennai, arrived in the foggy mornings and two trains at night, destined for north and south. The one at midnight that goes south to neighbouring Kerala , became the

favourite carrier for rapacious women smuggling rice bags. Being a secluded spot , too detached, the railway station became the safe transit point for loading rice or any other commodity unlawfully.

Tall piles of jaggery in sacks stand on the cement platform diffusing sweet aroma around to everyone in the vicinity. It is an every night humorous drama to see station cops chasing the women smugglers to extract hush money. When the Quilon mail arrives too weary, exhausted, the freight-in-charge men hoot noisy orders to load the jaggery sacks. Harlots board the train seeking clients wantonly.

Almost every traveller is sound-snoring and sleepy as the train itself . The guard blows the whistle, waves the flag in all disgust. As a millipede , the mail wriggles on dark-cloaked night, down south , the station is a god-forsaken spot. The station-master quits calling it a day.

The mystical silence, vacant spacious platforms , unoccupied cement couches , red-eyed signal lamps, buzzing of sonorous chicada , pitch-dark night faintly illuminated by twinkling tubelights under which I studied for college exams remain permanently etched in my memory. The occasional howls of curs tearing the thick pall of silence ,jerks my senses. The station's features , setting , milieu and the orchards beyond in the east , prompted me to pen a free-verse. There is something in me inexplicable that pulls me to its lap each day. Yet, unsure what it is

---*The New Indian Express*, Mindspace, 25th April, 2012

13. *Celibacy, thy name is Hanumanthayyah*

Mr Hanumanthayyah , occupied No. 12 South Mada Street in Srivilliputtur town , settled there in that house in 1960s. His schooling was not so impressive, and a failure in Form IV, made him turn his back to school forever and later turned an insider of his home. Being well-off and having been given an inheritance of immeasurable assets both movable and immovable , his parents had no hesitation in persuading him to get married.

Matrimony must be an individual , personal choice subject to one's own whim and a stubborn Hanumanthayyah wished not to get entangled in the ocean of matrimony. The ancient Sanskrit scholars defined the marital life as '*samsara sagaram*' (the ocean of matrimonial life). Sensing the ocean as salty, he dropped the offers of tying the knot around prospective brides and failed to enhance his existing assets

manifold. The cajoling and pleas of his parents did little effect upon his decision and perhaps Lord Hanuman , the celibate God picked him up as his ardent disciple.

His relatives began to depart for the heavenly home in gradual succession, which increased the loneliness of Hanumanthayyah more. He rented out the adjoining house to one Petchimuthu, who was also the supervisor of farming activities. Later, none took count of him in his family.

In his forties, he lost his hair, had ebony-skin , gained weight, turned rotund and appeared like a bulky sack of a quintal of sticky tamarind pressed tight.

The day dawned for him at 7-00 pm , when he had aromatic filter coffee at Gurunathan Cafe just outside the Andal temple. After washing himself , he donned a jasmine-white, dhoti and covered his torso with an

elaborate *jibba*. The Sundaram Cafe dating back to pre-independent period was his regular eatery, where he reminisced over the days of the past with men of his age and profile. Returning to his shelter, he filled his mouth with betel leaves and two pinches of tobacco which sedated him till noon.

When sun warmed his house interiors, he woke up later and tuned into the grand-old Murphy radiogram (that had electrical diodes as big as drinking glasses) to listen to Akashwani news bulletin broadcast from New Delhi, read out in the nasal accent of Saroj Narayanswamy. The tuning-out of the radio marks his departure for lunch session. Having his stomach filled sumptuously, he returned back, where he went for another session of betel and areca nuts.

The afternoon siesta meant a crore rupees for Hanumanthayyah as he loved every bit of it.

Another coffee at 3 when the sun's rays came down dust-laden through the windows in the upper floor. His evenings were all spent in pensive contemplation. When the temple-gong sounded 8 times at night, then silence descended on the streets around the temple and it was also the time for him to have a sonorous sleep again.

Life went in this monotonous fashion, unchanged for nearly three and a half decades. No significant changes. Nothing new. The progress of time brings change, as laws of dialectics say. But, for our man, under the sun, nothing changed.

The farm labourer visited him every week to detail out the work in progress, the tussle with coolies and neighbours, the water-sharing disputes, dry monsoon and the related rest. He departed after collecting his wage dues. The *dhobi* came every fortnight with piles of

unblemished white *jibbas* and dhotis. The Hanuman shrine priest came every Saturday morning with *tulsi prasadam* and collected a few coins as his fee.

Pethiah Pillai brought land disputes every month along with a posse of rustic ryots. In short, Hanumanthayyah's house was the 'executive office' of countryside matters of Mamsapuram village, where he owned 20 acres of fertile, wetlands that vegetated a bumper sugarcane crop year after year. A tradesman from Coimbatore crushed sugarcane and rolled out golden-sheen jaggery balls that were sold in bulk to Theriappa Nadar & sons.

The bank balance of Hanumanthayyah enlarged each season. Interest accrued over the initial deposits bulged at compounded interest and multiplied. Wealth begets wealth. Money begets money. Frugality is distinguished from miserliness. With his frugal expenditure and

constant savings, he had reserves equalling a banker of the town. Old age complications sprouted in his physique. A dust-laden , lime-plastered den made him asthmatic in the long run and his lungs were filled with sickly phlegm. In his seventies, he copiously coughed and ejected out infectious sputum. Dr Madana Gopalan B.Sc., M.B.B. S., F.R.C.S., attended on him periodically. It was a fitting combination that a chronic bachelor-doctor attended on another of his same ilk.

It was either Pethiah Pillai or Petchimuthu who escorted him to medical clinic at late nights. Age-related ailments visited him periodically. He preferred to remain indoors being too debilitated by ageing factors. Sundaram Cafe lost another worthy customer...

There is a practically unknown village near Sivakasi. A folk of this village in his forties committed a crude murder and was on the run.

As cops were on the look-out for the offender, the man came to Hanumanthayyah's abode with his family of four and stayed there. He had no nerve to disclose his past crime history. Hanumanthayyah was gracious and sympathetic to admit the entire family. The criminal's mother turned a cook for Hanumanthayyah. The new man's sister went to a food-packing factory for daily wages. The head of the family sold lucky raffle lottery tickets and got an earning. The woman cooked steaming rice, *rasam* and veggie stew each day and this was enough for Hanumanthayyah to fix them in his house and heart for permanence.

I was away in alien lands for a few years and returned home. After plesantries exchanged with my mother, I enquired about the well-being of the old man.

' Oh, that old crony ! He was too ill-ridden owing to asthma and passed away. Just a

few of his kins turned up. Most of them are settled abroad. Perhaps most have forgotten him forever'.

There was no sentimental sorrow peeping out through my eyelids in brine water drops. I had turned stoic having been a mute spectator of life of this austere bachelor for more than a quarter of a century. There was no sense of bereavement from my impassionate heart. An unproductive, un-flowering tree falls as a wood log and hardly anyone bothers about it. I mused over the poetry of Ben Jonson. The demise of Hanumanthayyah was just another infertile tree fallen. No losses. No tears.

The story ought to end here, but for the lack of a climactic slot. It could be anything. From setting upon an investigation into the mystery of his death, if he was given poisoned food by his caretakers or any event of sharp twist occurring posthumously.

The obsequies for the departed soul were performed religiously by the next skin of the deceased. Since he lived and left as a bachelor, the funeral rites were not that of cremation but burial , as according to Hindu customs. That done , a distant nephew of the brother of the sister-in-law of the father's cousin's aunt turned up all at a flash and lay claim to his property of the dead-old bachelor. Heartily everyone concurred with the claim of the new man and instituted him as the inheritor to the estates of the old man.

There were no bitter quarrels in the circle of close kins. Most of them were well-off who settled mostly outside the national frontiers. Must be filthy-rich.

All was silent in the house of Hanumanthayyah and who should enter into the picture, but , a woman in forties. One hot afternoon, Regina turned up from Madurai city

and claimed that she was the daughter to Hanumanthayyah and the lone successor and inheritor to the estates of the departed. The entire family circle of Hanumanthayyah was thrown into tantrums. Were they to take the claim of Regina as true or trash it as baseless statement ?

Regina was fair-looking , lemon-complexioned , bright and had noteworthy skin texture . There was no genetic link to trace her with her ' father'. Hanumanthayyah had tanned skin and round face, just with more than one different trait from his

' offspring'. Nothing could clear her off the house in South Mada Street. She squatted in the living room and refused to move. A few weeks she stayed there in that old house and declined to depart. The ' successor' of the bachelor turned out to be the hot topic chewed by everyone in the town.

Almost in every parley, people conversed like this :

“ How could a saint-bachelor have a daughter ? Did he father her ? Who was his paramour ? When did he find his mate ? ”

A month later, there was no news about Regina. But , she was not to be found in her ' father's house'. She vanished away and nothing was known about her whereabouts. What prompted her to leave and who prompted her to go were anybody's guess.

There was a bit of information in the grapevine that Hanumanthayyah who had rented his adjoining house out to one Petchimuthu , had no one to support him for everyday needs. Even for having a glass of hot water to swallow his regular pills , he depended squarely on Petchimuthu's family. In the 1960's, his needs were too many and everyone of them was carefully attended to by Petchimuthu's wife.

Hanumanthayyah who was lonely, was done courteous service by her in all submission. Behavioural submission led him to exercise behavioural supremacy. Hanumanthayyah grabbed one of those occasions to be the master of Petchimuthu's wife and perhaps played Adam to that old Eve. And Regina was born. The rest is history...

You may ruminate the rest over this idler's life, if it bore any fruits for him, for his family, for his society or for anyone in this wide world.

Perhaps Oscar Wilde's quote can help a lot in concluding this story.

' Every Saint has a past. Every sinner has a future'.

14. The milk '*khova*' of human kindness



Every pilgrim who lands in my holy shrine town Srivilliputtur seldom departs unless he buys a pack of milk khova (*dhoodh peda*) sold in the little shop close to the portal of Andal temple facing the east. Noted for its mellow nature and palate-provoking fine flavour, the product has long become the very synonym of our little town.

Well , if a curious inquirer quizzes me about the origin of the making (or baking) of

this sweet delicacy, may be I blink. There is no chronological beginning , fixing the time of its origin for this *dhoodh peda* , as it is with globally popular Tirunelveli Halwa. Should anyone fuzz about these probing , while all one has to do is to shuttle his hands between the platter and the mouth ?

Uncertain of its origin , the hidden secret of this recipe is akin to the secret of Solomon's mines. An octogenarian oldie from Yadava race in my town spilled the beans to me one day. The foot of the western ghats that stand as a nature backdrop to my town is lush with sprawling grassy fields and foliage through the year and the cows that graze there all the day, yield forth quality creamy milk. Quality of soil fixes the quality of grass. And quality of grass aids in yielding A-Grade milk. This when boiled gives forth splendid *creme de la creme* that foams and froths at the surface of the cauldron.

Rinsing the milk non-stop using a long ladle is a *sine qua non* for making this *khova*. To this boiling, bubbling, fatty fluid, sugar is added @ the rate of a kilo per litre of milk. Trained chefs know the culinary sleights of tasty peda, that it is the incessant, painstaking rinsing that gives it the taste and grandeur. Cardamom and cashew are concluding condiment seasoners. Saffron and raisins for a fine finish. Time consumed over the stove is usually 3-4 hours. The *dhoothh beda* is all set to tickle one's fine sense of food.

It has become the must-buy-and -carry item for every visitor to my town. I travel far and wide within and without Tamil nadu. The moment I utter my nativity, the next instant pops out the question as though a reflex action, if I belong to the town marked for its milk *khova*. Scarce does it embarrass me, conversely, I make a mind-picture of the bountiful grass

settings at the foot of the maternally-kind, western ghats. And I make a mental quote of Shakespeare's masterly-drafted lines 'the milk of human kindness'.

15. The lost nectar-dripping Buttercup flowers



The Western Ghats that border the Srivilliputtur town on the western horizon, running in north-

south orientation divides the geography of the state into two regions. The picturesque setting that boasted of rich flora and fauna in the days of yore, was the favourite haunting spot of the British colonels , officials of the Raj and the pleasure resort of the district collectors.

Upon a thorough study of the mountain and its rich ambience, the erstwhile Tinnevely district collector , while compiling the Imperial Gazetteer of India, made an aesthetic observation penning down his admiration for the region, stating 'the flowers in the Shenbaga Thoppu (Champak orchards) had such buttercup flowers from which I saw nectar dripping down'. This documentary observation was long back perceived by sages and rishis who treated the slopes and deep jungles in the ghats for their hermitage activities and an apt spot for penance.

The Kaattazhagar river that originated in the unknown peak of the mountain, flew down

charismatically making the plains below fertile and sustained the irrigation needs of peasants who reverentially treated the river as divine. In the words of the British sahib, the mountain had almost all the beasts of nature's pride, starting from grizzled squirrels and orangutans to cheetahs , tigers, pythons and pachyderms. It ought to have appeared similar to the Biblical Noah's Ark, with the variety of fauna present.

In the 1960s and '70s systematic logging of forest trees began in the region for firewood and charcoal. Year after year , the heartless felling of trees, went on at a steady pace. Local landlords ventured on weekends into the dense jungles with double-barrel licensed guns for gaming and returned with booty for the supper table. Needless to mention, the preventive or punitive measure from the forestry department brought no relief or remedy, as they were hand in glove ignoring these heinous acts. The innocent tribals were in

the dock, as false cases of wood-logging were foisted against them. Tribal women fell prey to the lascivious onslaughts of visiting higher officials. As the state was an inept spectator to the act, at the turn of 1980s, the mountains appeared as a head-tonsured person, much to the shock of environmental activists. The remedial measures were given financial pumping. The forest warden declared the region as a protected sanctuary. Endeavours to enforce the legal codes of the wildlife protection act, gaming act and every other dictum of law were done as a meek measure of repair.

Massive deforestation meant that during the seasonal rains when the Kaattazhagar inundated along with the water huge boulders also rolled down the hills. The Western Ghats that once stood as a majestic emperor enthroned, looks awful today, uncrowned and stripped of royal regalia. What was deemed to be the

handiwork of the almighty was past glory, as its present condition offers no hope of redemption. Nature's ways of retaliation are slow , but sure and strong. It avenges in a triple-fold measure , but belatedly.

---- *The New Indian Express*, Mindspace , 13th May, 2012

16. *The Twin Bell Tops of Justice*



“ Not a nail could pierce this wall ” my friend remarked.

“ Not even a German Shell can blast it either ” I added.

“ The very obdurate firmness with which it stands strikes

me with an awe ”.

We were physically feeling a rotund cylindrical pillar that stands in the hall of the Thirumal Nayak palace. A palatial building indeed.

“ What kind of building material they might have used ? ”

my friend quizzed.

“ Who knows ? But, not certainly RC. No cement and iron

rods business ”.

“ How come the Nayak kings build one such with no iron

bars or cement or any other strengthening materials ? The building science must have been at its primitive stages then , I suppose...” my friend surmised.

Yet , it is the big unassailable truth about the magnificent *Vasantha mandapam* (Hall of Solace and Retreat) built by Thirumal Nayak much close to the Andal temple in Srivilliputtur. The building was meant for the king to take a long repose after a tiresome journey in the south.

The Nayak king was a staunch and devout vaishnavite. He lived in the 16th century and spoke Telugu. Having subscribed to the Srivaishnava school , his bhakti for Andal was immense. He donated colossal quantities of gold , precious gems and jewels to the prime deity in the temple here. Further , the king donated hundreds of villages along with vast extent of cultivable lands to Andal temple , in and around Srivilliputtur just in order to let its toiling ryots fulfil the religious duties attached to it as a condition -precedent. The ryots had to pay taxes in terms of the produce.

The king's visits here to the *vasantha mandapam* , to the accompaniment of his Royal female counterparts (the King had more than one), was attended to with such a solemn parade of his courtiers and court attendants. All Royal pageant of colours and banners. Music and show. Cymbals and drums. Banners and flourish. Clarions and announcements.

One massive saloon was used by the Royal family of the king. And the durbar hall was utilized as a place to listen to the grievances of the denizens.

Having refreshed himself in the palatial building in the *mandapam*, the king had an occasion to listen to the petitions of the public. Well, the regal office of the king licensed him to be the presiding judge of any judicial dispute between the citizens. The king gave audience to the innumerable entreats and pleas. The complaints

were heard and verdicted anon , then and there, in a matter of a few minutes.

Matters pertaining to civil and criminal justice were tried by the King and speedy justice was rendered , unlike the so-called-judiciary system we have at present , where a person sues for a relief and his great grandson gets the fruits of judgment.

“ Was this the place, where Thirumal Nayak sat and administered such a speedy justice ? ”.

“ Yes, legends attribute this to the court hall. This raised platform must have been the seat of his throne. There was such a provision of light and ventilation through the dormer windows of this building that the interiors of this durbar hall were seldom in darkness. There was no dearth of light and air. Even there was such a provision for acoustics to enable the spoken sound heard at the other end of the

hall. Sans electric power. Sans ceiling fan. Sans microphone. Yet, the justice was dispensed sans defects and doubts.

“ Could you see the twin bell-shaped tops there ? ”. I threw a question at my pal.

“ Yeah , I could ” bending his head backwards , my pal looked atop the domes that converge at the top like a bell. Two halls with two bell tops of domes ”.

“ Amazing that it stands unshaken and rigid as a rock. No thunder can crack it nor a nail be driven inside ”.

“ Ages cannot wither, nor custom stale her...” I quoted from that celebrity playwright. “

The masons of the past used lime, red soil, bricks, palm jaggery , bitter pods toasted with eggs, to arrive at a mortar and built these walls. Plastering was done with lime. Those paintings that have stood there for more than

three centuries have been painted with herb juices and extracts of wild leaves. Mixing the crushed herbs plucked from the rich flora of western ghats, a range of several shades of hues were prepared. The decoction of the herbs were by nature indelible colours. The walls turned extra-large, wide-spread canvasses reaching artistic immortality by the brushes of Leonarda da Vincis and Rembrandts of erstwhile Tamil Nadu. Astounding that these paintings have stayed unfaded after thirty five decades.

“ So, is it all about Thirumal Nayak King? ”.

“ No, much more followed later after the Nayak kings. The colonial rulers admiring the magnificence and majesty of this construction, with due reverence to its noble, Royal tradition, declared it as a Court of Justice. In the forepart of the twentieth century, the durbar hall served the demands of the British. They must have

been under the spell of its beauty and immensity.

There is sufficient room inside the Durbar hall that three courts , could be spaciously accommodated in it. The Munsif court , the Magistrate court and the Subordinate court. When Her Highness Victoria, the Empress of Great Britain celebrated the royal crowning ceremony in all its pomp and grandeur in England, the court hall in Srivilliputtur was rejuvenated , decorated and given a new facelift , in conjunction with the occasion.

“ Could you read the calligraphy within that British emblem ? ”

“ I could. It reads : *Thirumal Naiks Hall - Srivilliputtur Taluk Cutchery , Decorated in the Jubilee Year -1887 - Of Her Most Gracious Majesty – Victoria the Empress of India* ”.

“ Yes, the Empress of Great Britain was also the Empress of India then ”.

A century and a half, the English judges patiently listened to the petitions and pleas and pronounced orders in a language devoid of any syntactical, jurisprudential or technical flaws.

The pleaders and vakils of those days were all from orthodox ghettos. All turban-headed, puritans. They were men of elegant wit and carried legal sagacity inside their enormous heads. Quick to learn a foreign tongue and swift in understanding a case. Mr Narasimhacharys, Mr Raghavacharys, Mr Rangacharys, Mr Srinivasacharys, Mr Thirumalacharys, Mr Desikacharys and all Charys.

They came to the court in white - dhoti wound around their waists, called *pancha katcham* (a method of tying the dhoti), black overcoat and turban on their heads. They wore *namam* (three vertical lines on their foreheads) and tendered an austere look. These pleaders and prosecutors spoke, presented, represented,

advocated and argued their cases in Indian accent , much to the strong surprise of the English bosses at the dais.

These court halls reverberated with their ingenious arguments during the trial. The *dawalis* and *massalgis* of the court wore golden-laced turbans and declared shouting a stentorian ‘ Silence , the court is Session ! ’, during the arrival of the judges from the chamber behind and departure from the platform at the end of the tired court day.

The process servers dutifully carried the summons and notices issued to the defendants, delivered them at the doorstep and in return probably got a small tip or a glass of cool buttermilk or perhaps a square meal from the village rustics who treated these peons as the very demi-gods.

Not much public transport vehicles were plying between the towns and rural hamlets.

Hence, the English judges preferred to commute by either cars or horse-drawn carriages to arrive at durbar halls. So, as long as they were inside the precincts and bounds of Srivilliputtur town, they felt safe in a divine sanctuary, for the entire landscape in and around Srivilliputtur was the sole domain of Andal, the presiding deity of the town.

The pleaders and vakils could be spotted in the evenings in the Andal temple doing obeisance to the deities or join the vaishnavite choir reciting the four thousand devotional hymns in a sing-song, well-tuned chorus.





Ah, what legends those pleaders were !! The legends of Charys and Iyengars , who collected their pleaders' fees in cash or in kind. At each dawn , a villager could be spotted at the doorstep of a *vakil* with a sack of grains or fresh-picked vegetables or dry, red chillies or tamarind with a sole purpose to please the pleader , who promised to forcefully represent the case of the innocent rural folk with 'urge' to the Englishman high above at the altar.

There was no avarice or demand of the learnt lawyer. Submission and fee payment came as a matter of course in all its spontaneity. A small loophole in the chargesheet or just a slip of the tongue of deposing prosecuting witness would do suffice to be picked up by the defence counsel, noted in his memory, rebutted in arguments , resulting in the acquittal of the accused.

What glorious legal legends !

My friend stood there in the spacious saloon , spell-bound, speechless , as I narrated nostalgically the sweet saga it left behind as a trail. We felt a moment when we were transported back to a century in a Time machine , with the interior milieu of the palace assisting us in this mental teleportation. We felt ,in a sort of reverie , we stood in front of the throne of Thirumalai Nayak and waiting for our turn to petition him. We could sensualize the

solemn, grave occasion as everyone looked forward to have his turn , to present the grievance and hear the Royal decree of the fair and just Monarch...

...The afternoon sunlight descended slanting as a shaft through the dormer windows atop the domes. The western side of the sky peeped through them shedding enough of its light much in the same way it shed many centuries ago. The same sun. The same sky. The same windows. We stood as mute witnesses to the chronicles of history testifying to nature that we saw the premises of historic grandeur.

A thick spectrum of dust made the interior more visible, the light radiant all over the walls of the palace. It was sufficient enough to fill the space inside to make it aglow...

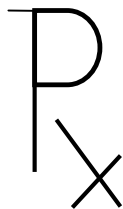
dawalis and *massalgis* -- subordinate level staff
; peons

vakil --- Persian word for a lawyer





17. *The Barefoot Doctor*



Hindu legends attribute the origin and growth of medical science to a savant - doctor by name Dhanvantri. In many Shiva temples , one could see the statuette of the first Indian doctor being worshipped and poojas performed with a protocol on *par* with the rest of the celestial immortals. The deferential treatment meted out to the ancient physician has many undertones.

That Indian ayurveda medical science was in its full and consummate condition , that it should have solved the riddle of death to upturn the mortal nature of humans with the

extensive contribution of Dhanvantri. That Dhanvantri's Ayurveda medicine is the science to conquer mortality.

Too tragically, this land of the virtuous and the wise medics lost its vast reservoir of ancient tradition of healing the sick and promising longevity for every living being on this planet. The land of the Dhanvantri has now turned into the land of the Allopathics. Too pathetically, in India, a doctor literally means one who punctures his patients with sharp, straight, syringes in the biceps muscles and forces them with motley -coloured pills and sweet solutions.

Mr Maya Kannan, could be taken for one Allopathic doctor, if you may trust his credentials that qualifies him as a practitioner of the art of healing. May be the only external credential that he donned all the time along with him was that he wore a pair of

trousers. It was the only thing he had in common with the thousands of well-qualified doctors on this land.

Mr Maya Kannan hailed from a village situate to the west of Srivilliputtur, by name Thirumalapuram. The name itself suggested its connection with the vaishnavaitic deity Thirumal (Vishnu). Being a Yadav by birth, this gentleman knew the practical aspects of animal husbandry. He knew exactly what quantity of fresh milk each cow tethered at his house backyard yielded each morning or would yield, judging by its nature.

His knowledge of feeding and breeding of cows was too remarkable, that his neighbours treated him as a subject expert in the veterinary science. A veteran in *mruha sastram* (veterinary science). Given the stock of knowledge that his rising of cows had given him , Maya Kannan mischievously experimented

it upon his fellow-men. Mr Maya Kannan spent his entire day in a dispensary in the heart of Srivilliputtur town, where a qualified Allopathic doctor from Madras opened up a clinic and attended to a huge crowd of long-waiting patients, chiefly rustics and village folk.

Mr Maya Kannan served as a compounder under the doctor, assisted him in dispensing pills and potions to the sick. When his master attended on the patients, Maya Kannan noted with all eagerness, how his employer approached each, studied the heartbeat with a stethoscope, read the wrist-pulse beat, quizzed the vital background of the patient such as his calling, location of his house, diagnosed, identified the cause and injected the right remedy.

For thirteen years, Maya Kannan stood at the left of the doctor noticing and mentally recording each act of the doctor in all

its minute details. The art of ‘ long-standing ’ practice of dispensing and distribution of medicines familiarized him with the effect each drug would do upon a person or the probable remedy that it would spell. He also noticed his aged employer occasionally picking up a fat , pillow-sized book from the shelf and turning its pages for seeking the solution to a critical malady.

But , Maya Kannan being unaware of letters of the alphabet , hated the bookish learning and leaned on the hands-on practical aspects of clinical treatment. A huge *materia medica* was of no avail for, until a doctor has studied the symptoms in full. ‘ *Quiz the patient. Study him* ’ , Mr Maya Kannan chanted a doctor’s mantra unto his heart.

He never missed a chance to notice what the precautions his senior took while administering intra-venous fluids such as sucrose

and saline solutions in their sterile form. Treating bruises , cut-wounds , skin ruptures with sulphur compounds and ointments. Paracetamol , that magical drug prescribed by every doctor for every illness. That panacea for every infirmity. Nourishing tonics that tones up the conditions of the bed-ridden. (Loved by every sick man for their honey, mellow sweetness). Maya Kannan 'mastered' everything left over by Hippocrates.

A stethoscope, a vertically-standing thermometer and a prescription pad on the table covered with a rectangular glass sheet , hungered his look. The complimentary glass cubes with the names of the drug manufacturers engraved in flamboyant letters carried catchy slogans that sounded Hebrew to him. The fashionable revolving chair was too fanciful. The female paramedics clad from head to toe in snow - white dress seemed to be sweet angels

descended from heaven. Their head aprons crowned them as queens of beauty. Too tempting that every diseased person would love to be treated by those chic seraphs. These P's and Q's of a doctor, the very paraphernalia of a doctor, fascinated Maya Kannan. The entire setting appeared as a shiny little world in front of him.

“ If an apprentice carpenter working under his senior after getting well- trained can turn a carpenter , why not a compounder become a doctor ? What is the serious harm in that ? This land has no sufficient number of doctors. There is a chronic shortage for doctors on this sub-continent and diseases are fast spreading. Epidemics break out every now and then, here and there and everywhere. When there are heavy showers, the very next day people rush to the hospital either with a flu or water-borne diseases. This is the only land where all

countless epidemics and strange diseases spread out among the ignorant citizens.

So more so, each illiterate is generous enough to donate his illness to his friends and neighbours, making his entire surroundings disease-ridden. And the M.B.B.S., doctors are the most fortunate ones to make dough out of this chaos. They open their clinics in the morning and till late night, they don't stop their work, injecting and collecting. Injecting drugs and collecting money. Their chest of drawers are filled to the full with hot currency notes, uncounted by the man who earned, since he has not a single minute at his disposal to count them. What a wonderful profession!! " Mr Maya Kannan ruminated.

This land certainly needs more doctors. Crores of ailing people languish in sickly beds and yet very few thousands of doctors. In terms of proportion in maths, this is

disproportion. This imbalance should be set right. So, Maya Kannan came to a sound decision.

And one morning, when his boss turned at his seat for his daily routine work, Mr Maya Kannan tendered his resignation to his employer. He didn't draft it on a sheet of white paper with all phrases of sweet submission. (A cow-boy carries no pen in his shirt pocket). He spoke with all oral submission to his senior, stating his inability to continue there at the menial service of grinding liquid compounds in a mortar. The senior nodded his head and didn't say a word. Mr Maya Kannan thought that his senior would give him a fat gratuity or a massive sum as *ex gratia* on leaving the job. But, the thankless doctor just didn't mouth a single word, nor pleaded with him to continue there, nor paid tributes to his past service, but simply showed him the door.

Well , that's it. He was off. Mr Maya Kannan felt free as a bird. He felt he had stepped out of a university with a medical degree graduating in the art of allopathic healing. He walked erect majestically, never stooping forward. Now, his only regret being that he lost the pittance earning he made out each month. On the first of every calendar month , his senior would fish out three hundred rupees off his chest of drawers , all crisp currency notes and would stretch them at him. That he lost his earning , that meagre amount in lieu of becoming an independent.

Having stepped out of his favourite working spot for the day, Mr Maya Kannan searched for a place to begin his trade. Not everyone was interested to lend him a hired spot within the town. Each landlord wondered , if he would promptly pay the monthly rent. So, after weeks of laborious search, pedalling his

bicycle into almost every lane and by-lane within Srivilliputtur, Maya Kannan spotted a place somewhere opposite the temple tower in the Gopuram street.

He located a vacant room in the home of the temple choir-group leader , the *Arayar*. The front pyol of the Arayar's house was vacant and there it goes. Maya Kannan spoke gentle words to the Arayar and convinced him that the front space in his home would be given to him for a monthly rent. The Arayar, being the most impoverished person in the entire street, readily agreed.

The monthly rent was haggled at fifty rupees, prompted with a condition that it should be tendered within the first week of every month. The very next day, Maya Kannan stepped into the pyol of the Arayar's house with his set of furniture which included a wooden table, a quadruped stool and reclining

chair. A white enamel-coated wide, metal basin was suspended on a tripod stand. A small wooden rack had a display of English medicines. Yes, he managed to steal from his senior everyday. A stethoscope (that was old and unused by his senior), a cork-topped metal hammer for Vodja test (stolen from the senior) were the tradewares he possessed.

Now, Maya Kannan turned into a full-fledged doctor. He seated himself in the reclining chair and looked around with a pride. Each morning, he would arrive outside his little dispensary with a signboard that read '**Dr K Maya Kannan R. M. P.,**' He waited for an hour or so for patients to arrive. But, none would come. That's it. He would mount on his bicycle with his leather satchel and would be off. He would roam around in all the four streets that ran around the Andal temple eagerly hunting for the presence of the sick and disabled. But,

who would trust a bicycling doctor ? A doctor is to be identified by the vehicle he arrives in. And poor Maya Kannan became a *Yama Dharma* on wheels.

Someone misidentified him as a travelling medical representative. But , their presumptions were falsified , when they learnt that he was a doctor on two wheels.

The tiny hamlets around Srivilliputtur were the favourite trade spots for him. Innocent folks were his darlings. The aged men who can't hear or see and those who limp were his regular customers. Where ignorance breeds canker-like , the unscrupulous rascals flourish. So, Maya Kannan flourished in his trade. When he passed the streets, he made casual remarks, and enquired about the health of each and every one of a family.

' *Aiya*, is everyone okay in your house ?'

This also meant that he was making a professional enquiry to assure if they are healthy.

Most of them nodded their heads in approval and waved their hands. This made him to move on. Not a single street in Srivilliputtur was omitted in his rounds. He was the prompt man arriving in each street on each day, like the postman who rings his bell arriving at noon.

Each time, Mr Maya Kannan moved out of Srivilliputtur, he was excited to see his kinsfolk. " Poor folks " he thought , " if I don't turn up here, will any government doctor or private physician care to heal the sick ? I know their places and arrive at their doorsteps. A voluntary service, no white-collar doctor would afford to. Yet , I do visit each man too personally and don't charge them a fat fee " he reflected critically.

Indeed, he didn't charge much. His fee was too nominal. For giving pills and administering an injection , he charged just Rupees ten or twenty depending upon the impoverished condition of his client. If the man belonged to his own communal identity, then it was always ten.

His dome-shaped leather bag contained drugs for every sickness under the sky. White, yellow, brick - red, pink or pale blue. The colour stood for the disease, according to Maya Kannan. He cared two hoots for the date on which the damned drug came to the chemist's for sale or whether the product itself has been currently available in the apothecary's shops. Outdated drugs are those drugs that make a person live beyond every date.

Hence, after diagnosis of a patient , he would pick up a handful of pills in his cupped palm and scrutinize the colours. His choice of

pill colour, depended strongly on the symptoms he discovered in his client.

“ You have high fever. Non-stop cough. Back-ache. Chest congestion. Sputum”. Then he would bend his neck towards to the hut and would cry “ Madam, can you boil some hot water ? Need to give an injection ”. He carried vials of various types. Used and unused. Small and large. All medicines with names that ended with -cin or -sin.

He would give a shot of antibiotic to the patients. When he pierced the biceps muscle, he inadvertently remembered his mentor-guru, closed his eyelids for a while and paid his honour then , in his mind.

“ Here, let me give you four pills. One for each illness. Four pills in the morning, noon and at night. No chillies or tamarind in your diet. Only curd rice or bread and milk. No mutton food

for a month ". He suggested tips like an expert dietician , cautioned the wife of the patient , collected his fee in all submission , sometimes haggled for more, citing the drugs he gave. Pocketing the money, he mounted on his bicycle and was off to the nearby hamlet.

He pretended that he had a drug for almost every infection. " If not one , then the other would heal the sick. All drugs are functionally the same. They make the sick person sleep peacefully. They digest well the food taken in. The patient recovers the very next day. Names differ. The effect is the same, " he rationalized over the pharmacological function of tablets packed in aluminium foils.

The rainy seasons saw Mr Maya Kannan too busy round the clock. Cholera and typhoid break out in the remote villages at the foot of western ghats. No doctor worth the name would venture to go over there nor the

government officials bothered to visit and take remedial action. The only non-governmental official visiting them with all love was our Maya Kannan.

A tribal clan lived far away from the town in the deep jungle at the west. He was the only visiting doctor to care them. The days when he visited them saw jubilation , for he would personally name every man of the tribe. This made him their man. The Paliya tribesmen didn't bother to question the academic records of this doctor-on-rounds. This made our man their hero. He attended to their illnesses and got fruits, sweet tubers and honey in lieu of cash.

All is well in his medical practice , as long as the people were unwell. Years rolled on. The name Maya Kannan was literally forgotten by everyone in the surroundings. He was called as 'Doctor'. What a pride he had , when his face beamed as they called ' Here

comes our Doctor ! ' No doubt, he became their family doctor too.

One afternoon, when he was returning from his usual rounds from Mamsapuram , he spotted a dozen men digging the poromboke lands at the exit of the village. A stout man was supervising them. ' Must be digging the foundation for a house' he thought.

' What's going on ? A new house ? Who builds it ? ' He questioned to the sweat-dripping coolies.

' Oh, doctor sir. We're digging for a new building. The government hospital is going to be built here ' replied the tired worker.

' Ah , if there is a government hospital, will doctors turn up here ? ' he raised another query.

' Why not ? A big hospital for the entire surroundings. Many doctors and nurses to come

here ' the worker remarked as he continued digging.

There were rays of disillusionment , as Maya Kannan knew about the upcoming government hospital.

' If there is one, will everyone rush there ? Will everyone get free treatment and free medicines ? What about my trade ? Won't anyone turn up to me ? ' he introspected.

In the months that followed, he saw the hospital building rising faster than he could think of. The foundation , the concrete structure and the interiors. The contractor and supervisors were working day in and day out. Each time, Maya Kannan crossed past the construction site, he saw his wild foe rising there high above , in a form he could not conquer. It was no doubt his adversary.

One Monday morning , the government hospital was thrown open to the

Mamsapuram public. The Hon'ble Minister for health cut the red ribbon and opened it up. On the very first day, there were hundreds eagerly waiting to get their wards treated for every malady. Nothing would express the dismal heart of Maya Kannan on that day as he rode on his bicycle with his trademark leather bag. He couldn't dare to turn at the direction of the hospital. It was on the southern side of the highway road leading to the village. He made his usual rounds into the narrow, dusty lanes of Mamsapuram. Not a soul he could spot in his clients' houses.

He cursed everyone of them for being disloyal to him. He made a few more rounds and there was none. Feeling heated-up, fatigued, too disillusioned, he turned around his bicycle, mounted on it and hastened back. The teashop man shouted at him.

‘ Doctor, have a glass of tea and go’. He was the only one to give complimentary cups of tea each day without charging anything’.

‘ No’ , he negated the offer. ‘ Not now. Some other day.’

Maya Kannan returned to his dispensary in Gopuram street. It was a hot afternoon. The landlord Arayar was not there in the house.

‘ Must have gone to the temple or mutt for a free meal’ he thought.

The afternoon sun pierced the tinted glass and shattered countless hues of light on the *pyol*. As he sat in his wooden throne , he basked in the sunlight beam dispersed in a spectrum , presented him in manifold brilliant colours.

As he sat in his physician’s chair , he caught his temples. An ache similar to hammer beating , split his head into two. ‘ The

Mamsapuram sun is the hottest on the earth' he remarked.

' It fries and roasts every being there in the region close to the western ghats. The only relief is provided by the palm groves stretching all over in the surrounding villages , providing cool shelter for the natives there '.

Maya Kannan stared towards the living room of Arayar. None was there. It was pitch dark. It was always so during the daytime. A thick cloud of dark smoke hung suspended always in the living room and in the kitchen. The Arayar 's house had never seen light ever since it was built.

' They must be cooking all the time. Poor women there. They were tied down with household chores ', he commented with a note of sympathy.

He shouted ' amma, amma'. No reply came.

‘ Could you get me a glass of hot water, amma?’ .

It seemed all his words went past the living room and dissolved in the thick cloud of smoke along the pathway leading to the kitchen. He cried once more. He appealed again and again.

It turned out to be a cry in wilderness.

Maya Kannan was ashamed of calling out his landlord for getting assistance.

‘ Poor man ! For a mere fifty rupees a month, they rented out the space. Would it be fair to demand hot water or coffee ?’ .

He looked at the door. The sun was beating down fiercely. The Andal temple tower was resplendent as it took all the sun on itself. It was a white-hot day in Srivilliputtur. Some coolies were pulling a wheeled carriage and passed along his dispensary. A groundnut seller

carried a basket of nuts and shouted all the way as she went in the street. An aged beggar was dragging on his steps holding an aluminium bowl and seeking alms at each door. A peddler pulled a cart of stainless vessels offering for sale. It seemed to him that time had frozen and stood still.

The servant-maid turned up at the door.

‘Went to the ration-shop. They told, sugar will be distributed on Saturday only. Not today’. Waited from morning till now’. She whined.

‘Palaniamma, I’ve been waiting for you for so long’.

‘Doctor, what do you need?’.

Palaniamma was always at the disposal of anyone living in Gopuram street. She did all household chores, went to ration shops, bought them provision, fetched them water and did every errand. In return, she got food or money.

‘ O, Palaniamma, I have a head-splitting headache. I need black coffee. It seems the women inside are asleep. Can you get me some from the shop in the east car street? ’

‘ Not sure if there are any shops open there. Let me get some from Somasundaram Pillai café ’.

She got money and slowly pulled off....

...The close kins had arrived at the tiled house of Maya Kannan at Thirumalapuram. As per the rural norms, one each from every family turned up there as participant. Maya Kannan's wife, a woman of fifties stood close near her relatives. Maya Kannan's elder brother who lived in Madurai was sent a telegram and he arrived immediately. The entire Thirumalapuram Yadav clan was present. Palaniamma was also present in the throng.

‘ It is too sudden. Unexpected, sister ’, remarked the man from Madurai.

‘ Anna, what can I say ? He was too strong as Andal temple pillar. I saw him yesterday. He was firm. *Aiyo*, he passed away all of a sudden’.

‘ Who was present at the spot ? ’ the Madurai man interrogated.

‘ This Palaniamma ’ Maya Kannan’s wife replied, pointing to the old dame sitting nearby squeezing her nostrils with the edge of her cotton sari.

Madurai man looked at Palaniamma’s face for explanation. Needless she knew what the next question would be.

‘ *Aiya* ’ Palaniamma commenced her statement, ‘ Doctor was not seen in the forenoon yesterday. He came at about three in the afternoon to the hospital. He had a severe headache. He caught his head between his hands and reclined on the table’. Once again she squeezed her nostrils with the edge of her sari

expressing her deep grief and continued deposing.

‘ What would I say ? He told me to get him black coffee. I got money and bought from Somasundaram Pillai café. Before he took coffee, he opened his leather bag on the wooden stool , picked up a handful of medicines and sorted out one by one. He kept them on the table. He looked at them and later picked one. He popped up into his mouth and sipped black coffee’. Then he placed his head on the table. I went away to wash utensils inside the house. Doctor *ayya* never spoke later ’.

The relatives stood confounded at what made the doctor meet his fatal end...

... It is better I leave the story of Dr Maya Kannan R. M.P., at this juncture and leave the rest to the supposition of my reader.

What would I say about a backstreet doctor who treated everyone in the entire Srivilliputtur

taluk locality with his outdated medicines, but forgot to take a caution when he himself took one ! ?

R. M.P. -- Registered Medical Practitioner